

"Official" Islam in Post-9/11 Mauritania

On commence du zéro, a partir du 11 Septembre on commence du zéro... c'est la vérité! (Hamdan Ould Tah, LMU's Chairman, February 2002)

In Mauritanian television there is a weekly "seminar" (*madarat*) between members of the League of Mauritanian Ulama (LMU) and the so called "modernist professionals," including doctors, engineers, and university professors. The LMU's president, Hamdan Ould Tah, explains that these televised discussions represent "the meeting of modernity with traditionalism" at a time when "we are between two worlds, facing a modernity that doesn't leaves us a very long time to make decisions..." It is no coincidence that such programmes in the mass media, and indeed the founding of the LMU itself, have occurred in a post-9/11 context. The ulama of the LMU are striving to build a religious discourse where the concept of "modernism" is made relevant to everyday life, if religiously rearranged. Although Mauritanian society maintains deep Islamic roots, there are inescapable cultural elements associated with a "foreignness" that are too significant to be overlooked by the ulama. These religious authorities acknowledge that they are not the sole producers and codifiers of knowledge and, in response, acutely try to incorporate the "exterior" or "foreign influenced" elements within their eminent religious sphere, and by so doing re-legitimizing their authority. This is probably one of the fundamental aspects that led to the creation of the LMU, and the justification for this innovative TV programme.

Discussions between members of the ulama and non-religiously trained professionals are indicative of some theological changes taking place in Mauritania. The proposal the LMU is trying to see theologically implemented has to do with a project that the Ulama call "amended Islam," or, an equally valid, "amended modernism." The most visible reform made with this method is the recent "Code du Statut Personnel" (19 July 2001). This civil code which refers to all familial relations including marriage and divorce, has been accepted by diverse social forces in the country whether religious, non-religious, or foreign NGO's. The

The "League of Mauritanian Ulama" (LMU) was established in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 2001. The period between its foundation and the presidential election of 2003 delineates a definite change in the way Islam has been organized in Mauritania. It has become fundamental to incorporate actors not directly related with the official religious hierarchies in religiously focused discussions, and theologians have been approaching religious issues from a centralized state logic.

LMU has also initiated an intercultural discussion, or what might be called dialogues, with "the West." Moreover, this organization has effectively made use of the technology of communications to promote Islam.

Centralizing religion with the telephone

The LMU tries to unify the communication of its religious rulings throughout the country. Religious offices were

opened in each regional capital, with every office equipped with a telephone line so that people could directly contact their local *faqih*. The telephone also facilitated a quick distribution of the fatawa (s. fatwa), and for affairs of extraordinary complexity there is the "appeal" telephone of LMU's chairman in Nouakchott. Although the Chairman has an impressive library to draw on for study and reflection, it is actually the telephone that consumes most of his time. These ulama effectively and efficiently use the telephone and their "tele-fatwas" as a convenient means of transmitting their religious jurisdiction. Face to face meetings with the ulama are still valuable, and remain privileged territories, nevertheless, other spaces for communication are becoming important, and this use of the telephone is a significant example.

The LMU is now a nationwide organization, with a nationwide ulama membership. This might lead, for the first time in the history of Mauritania, to a centralized religious structure capable of contouring tribal affiliation and significant differences in religious tradition. These ulama are now able to reach a major part of the population thanks to a strong financial capacity, and because they clearly profit from the utilization of state structures to promote their models.

Alliances with power

The chairman of the LMU stated in 2002 that his organization was "neither outside, nor inside, the state's government." However, a strong association with state power was soon exposed when these ulama took the governmental side in the 2003 presidential campaign, touring the country with the victorious candidate. Earlier, the LMU was considered a powerful religious agent in the centre of political decisions, but not a direct supporter of the government.

After three years of activities the LMU assumed a definitive link with the government and has been attempting to define a centralized religious authority. The LMU has composed a clearly structured Islamic discourse, associating determined religious dogmas (Malikite, Ash'arite) with a declared "national Islamic tradition," where the dialogue with "modernism" and the West are also included. A dual strategy is applied in this new religious mechanism: the use of innovative technology (meant to give a fresh face to the traditional ulama), in addition to holding dialogues with non-religiously trained professionals and groups and organizations from the West. The activities of the LMU can be said to be contributing to a fundamental redefinition of Mauritanian nationality, as the LMU's version of Islam is becoming the state endorsed version. Whether or not the LMU will be successful in associating nationality with its defined and fixed model of Islamic identity is a question still left open.

The author during fieldwork, Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2004



Francisco Freire is a Ph.D. student at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Departamento de Antropologia.
Email: f.rosa@clix.pt